

Improving Sentence Structure

Common Problems and Fixes

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Sentences may have different types of problems with their structure

These various problems can include:

- fragments
- run-on sentences (comma splices or fused sentences)
- loose sentences
- choppy sentences

Each problem will have a different "fix." But first, let's review what a sentence is, and how it works.

The basic building block of a sentence

Sentences are composed of **clauses**.

Clause: a group of words including both a subject and a verb.

Example: "I slept."

OR

Example: "I slept like a log in the comfy bed."

(The subject is "I" and the verb is "slept" in both cases.)

1) One of the common problems with sentence structure is fragments

This is where either the subject or the verb is missing, so the sentence is not complete.

Example: "The brown package by the door."

In this case, there is a subject ("package"), but **no verb**.

Example: "Jumping quickly."

Here, there's a verb ("jumping"), but **no subject**.

How do you fix a sentence fragment?

Do you remember what a clause, the building block of a sentence, has to contain? A **subject** and a **verb**. Let's fix the previous fragments so they contain both:

Example: "The brown package by the door fell over."

We added "fell" as the **verb**.

Example: "My dog is jumping quickly."

In this case, we added "dog" as the **subject**.

2) Run-on Sentences: fused or comma splice

A sentence can contain more than one subject-verb clause. But it's how we join them together that can cause problems.

Two clauses **that could stand on their own** can be joined into one larger sentence by inserting a comma and using joining words called **conjunctions**.

If you leave out the conjunction, you create a **comma spliced** sentence, which is not grammatically correct.

Here's a sentence with two clauses joined by a comma and a conjunction

"I wanted to shop, so my brother drove me to the store."

The two basic sentences are:

- 1) "I wanted to shop."
- 2) "My brother drove me to the store."

The longer sentence was created correctly, joined by an **inserted comma** and the **added conjunction**, "so."

But what about this sentence?

"He ate his lunch, I played ball."

There are two separate clauses, and each one has a subject and verb. So this isn't a matter of sentence fragments.

But where is the conjunction?

This is a **comma splice**! These separate sentences have nothing to join them properly into one.

A **run-on** sentence is very similar, but also leaves out the comma:

"He ate his lunch I played ball."

A comma splice at least reminds you that you should pause between sentences, because they are separate from each other.

A run-on sentence doesn't show that these are two separate clauses, and doesn't indicate any dividing place between them.

Both run-ons and comma splices can be fixed the same way.

Fixing Run-on Sentences (Fused and Comma Spliced)

1) Put a **period** instead of the comma, and make two complete sentences:

"He ate his lunch. I played ball."

OR

2) Insert the **comma**, and add a joining **conjunction**:

"He ate his lunch, and I played ball."

Other Conjunctions That Join Clauses

Coordinating Conjunctions: join two clauses that are **independent** enough that they could stand alone.

- and
- but
- for
- yet
- so
- nor

3) What are Loose Sentences?

Do you remember how a clause has a subject and verb?
Do you remember how **independent clauses** can be joined in a sentence, but could also have stood alone?

Some clauses, called **subordinate clauses**, join one or more independent clauses in a sentence, but could not stand on their own.

Loose sentences are sentences that have too many of these subordinate clauses joined in one sentence.

Correct Joining of Independent and Subordinate Clauses

Have a look at this sentence: "I love my cat, who sleeps near me at night."

"I love my cat" is **independent**; it can stand alone.

But what about: "Who sleeps near me at night"?

No! **This is a subordinate clause.** "Who" is the subject, and "sleeps" is the verb, but it can't stand alone.

Subordinate Clauses and Types of Conjunctions

Subordinate clauses are joined to sentences with **subordinate conjunctions** such as: after, before, whenever, because, if, while

That said, they can also be joined to sentences with **relative pronouns** such as: which, whoever, that, whose, who, whomever

When you keep adding subordinate clauses with these joining words, you create long, loose sentences that need fixing!

Example of a Loose Sentence

Here is a sentence with too many subordinate clauses:

"I thought I was ready for the test but I failed which meant I had to take a summer course before I could graduate which I didn't want to do because I already had a summer job lined up."

How many different clauses are there in this sentence?

Independent clause: "I thought I was ready for the test"

Independent clause: "I failed"

Subordinate clause: "which meant I had to take a summer course"

Subordinate clause: "before I could graduate"

Subordinate clause: "which I didn't want to do"

Subordinate clause: "because I already had a summer job lined up"

How will we ever clean up this sentence?

Usually, a loose sentence needs to be broken down into more than one sentence.

Here's just one way of rewriting that sentence:

"I thought I was ready for the test, but I failed. This meant I had to take a summer course before I could graduate. I didn't want to do this, because I already had a summer job lined up."

Some of the subordinate clauses had to be turned into independent clauses, to form new sentences.

4) Dealing with Choppy Sentences

These sentences are actually written correctly, with a proper subject and verb. But when you get a few short, blunt sentences one after the other, they create a "choppy" impression.

The problem here is that choppy sentences are boring to read. Because they are all pretty simple and unless they are very deftly handled, choppy sentences make your writing look simple too, as if you can't express more complex ideas.

A Paragraph of Choppy Sentences

Here's an example of a series of choppy sentences:

"My grades weren't good. I hadn't studied enough. I have to work harder. My mom isn't pleased. She's hiring a tutor. That might help."

Doesn't everything sound the same after a while? Those sentences need some variety!

A Better way to Write the Paragraph

Do you think this sounds better?

"My grades weren't good, because I hadn't studied enough. I really have to work harder. My mom isn't pleased, so she's hiring a tutor, and that might help."

Remember: you want to keep your readers interested and not put them to sleep!

The end.

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